2 N’kamba

The Road to Revelation

The ‘Prehistory’ of Mandombe

When I started recording the story of Wabeladio in 2009, he insisted we should start with the ‘prehistory’. ‘Prehistory’, in his view, was everything that had happened to Wabeladio before the invention of writing. Yet, I was surprised to realise, as soon as he started to tell me the narrative, that he meant not only things that had happened to him but also things that had happened to his grandfather and namesake, Wabeladio David.

The biography of Wabeladio David turned out to be very relevant to the understanding of the deep historical links between Mandombe and Kimbanguism. Wabeladio had got the story through listening carefully to his maternal grandmother and his mother in the 1980s and 1990s. It all started at the end of the nineteenth century or the turn of the twentieth century with a Kongo man called Bidingwa James, Wabeladio assured me, about whom, unfortunately, we could not find any written records.

As a very young man, Bidingwa James moved from his native village to Ngombe Lutete [Map 2.1]. In Ngombe Lutete, Bidingwa James learned to read and write and studied the Bible. Eventually he became employed as a courier boy by the Baptist Missionaries.1 Every end of the month, Bidingwa had to go to the capital of the district, Thysville [today Mbanza-Ngungu]. One day, on his way back from Thysville, he saw, in a hamlet called Mpete, two children fighting fiercely. He was

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1 The British Baptist Missionary Society on the Kongo was based in Ngombe Lutete from 1888; previously, since 1878, it had been based in the Angolan town of São Salvador, once the capital of the Kingdom of Kongo. It subsequently became very important in the history of the Bakongo. The missionaries had already produced a Kikongo dictionary and grammar in 1887 (Bentley 1887), and some years later they produced an entire translation of the Bible (entitled Nkanda Nzambi, it was completed in 1916; a previous translation by Swedish missionaries, entitled Masonukwa Manlongo, had been published in 1905). Simon Kimbangu, the early twentieth-century prophet, was educated at the Baptist mission, and oral history has it that he had been a Baptist catechist. Research in the Baptist archives in the UK yielded no information on Bidingwa James, Wabeladio’s grandfather’s adoptive father. As we will see, the three main world religious traditions of the Kongo (Baptism, Kimbanguism, and Catholicism) play an important role in Wabeladio’s spiritual narrative.
told that the two children were brothers, and orphans, and that they often fought one another. He then had an idea. He told the villagers that, in order to separate the children, he would adopt one of them. He picked the younger one, called Wabeladio David. The older one, Wunda Tomas, remained in Mpete. Wabeladio David went to school in Ngombe Lutete. When he finished his studies, he was recruited by the English missionaries as a monitor for the younger boys. He became rather independent and was approaching the age to be married. One day, Bidingwa James called Wabeladio David and told him he wanted him to marry his most beautiful daughter, Lombo Marie.

According to Wabeladio, despite being adoptive siblings, Lombo and Wabeladio David were forced by Bidingwa to get married in a wedding that happened at the beginning of 1921.

Six months after the ceremony, news started to spread across the entire Kongo Central about the ngunza ['prophet'] Simon Kimbangu, who was pronouncing prophecies and performing miracles in N’kamba, a small hamlet just 12 miles away from Ngombe Lutete. In one of the most important moments in the religious and colonial history of the continent,
huge crowds of people began gathering every day at the hamlet to see the holy man, be healed by his hands, and be counselled by his words. On 6 April 1921, Kimbangu resuscitated a woman with his touch in N’kamba, on the periphery of the so-called Free State of Congo, a possession of the king of the Belgians. This was the birth of Kimbanguism.

Simon Kimbangu, the prophet, was educated at the Baptist mission of Wathen, in Ngombe Lutete, then a tiny village, and it is certainly possible that he and Wabeladio David knew each other well. According to the narrative Wabeladio was told, when news broke about Kimbangu’s miracles in N’kamba, Wabeladio David decided to see with his own eyes what was happening.

He arrived in N’kamba on 12 September, the very day Kimbangu was captured by the Belgian soldiers and taken to Thysville. Because he was in N’kamba that day, Wabeladio David was taken prisoner too.

He was not the only one. In fact, one of the most striking characteristics of Kimbanguism today is the role of the bazole (or zinzole, depending on the dialect; a word translated into French as relégués, ‘relegated people’). These were followers of Kimbangu who were taken as prisoners either with the prophet or shortly afterwards. They were sent to other provinces of the Belgian Congo, where their lives were strictly controlled and marked by great suffering, including torture and death. Today, most of the relegated people are dead, and their children are considered to represent their parents. The Kimbanguist church continues to memorialise these martyr-like figures through their offspring. Every Sunday, in every Kimbanguist service, there is a moment when all the bazole stand up and are greeted by the brass band. The remembrance of these relegated people is a very important element of Kimbanguism, as it helps keep alive the memory of colonial suffering, while helping to heal the pain of that suffering.

Wabeladio David was relegated to a military camp in Port Francqui [now Ilembo], in the Kasai. The Belgians went to Ngombe Lutete to take his [Wabeladio David’s] wife too. The two of them lived for a very short time in the Kasai, where Wabeladio David worked as the courier boy in the camp. But Wabeladio David was not only a courier boy. He was also in charge of organising clandestine prayers in the bush every afternoon in the company of other Bakongo fellows.

Praying for Kimbangu (then in prison in Élisabethville) was a common feature of the religious practices of the relegated people. In fact, by dispersing the relegated all over the colony in what, to borrow from Foucault, we could describe as an archipelago imprisoning (Foucault 1975), the colonial authorities helped disseminate Kimbanguism and
spread an anti-colonial and proto-nationalist message that gave a sense of oppressed unity to the colonialised territory. In this context, prayer became a powerful ‘weapon of the weak’ (Scott 1977). It was one of the elementary forms of resistance, both in the sense of a counterforce to hegemonic colonial culture and in the sense of physical and spiritual endurance.

Wabeladio David’s secret was discovered by the Belgians. According to his grandson, three Belgian soldiers went to his house one day at 11 a.m. and took him to a hospital. They were speaking in Flemish so neither Wabeladio David nor Lombo understood what was going on. In the hospital, the doctor told him that he had some ganglions. He gave him an injection in the neck and let him go home. When they arrived home, Wabeladio David told his wife he was not feeling well, he felt a muscular contraction. He asked for a Bible and sat down. Lombo went to fix some food. When she came back into the room, her husband was dead.

Lombo Marie then returned by boat to Kongo Central and went to Mpete to announce his death. A funerary ceremony took place there, after which she also disclosed that she was three months pregnant. The family asked her to stay so that the child could be born in the original village of his or her father. She agreed. When Lombo Marie was eight months pregnant, a young girl came to her with a letter: ‘A man who was passing by asked me to give this letter to you.’ Nobody saw where the mysterious man had gone after delivering the letter. The letter said: ‘The person you are going to give birth to will be called Vumi wa Nzambi Lubantiku Lozayi.’

In Kisingombe (the Kikongo dialect spoken in that region), this name is a translation of the biblical phrase ‘God’s fear is the beginning of wisdom’ (which occurs several times in the Bible, initially in Proverbs 1: 7–8).

A discussion emerged then within the clan about the name of the child. Some said that if she had a boy, he had to be called Wabeladio David; if she had a girl, she should be named like Wabeladio David’s mother. Others said that whether it was a boy or a girl, the name had to be that in the letter, because nobody knew who the emissary was. They won. According to my grandmother Lombo, once Vumi [Vumi wa Nzambi Lubantiku Lozayi] was born, she received present after present for an entire year, without ever knowing where the presents came from. When the girl grew up, the clan of her mother in Ngombe Lutete reclaimed her. They came to Mpete, offered a goat to the father’s clan to thank them for their help and took the widow Longo and her child Vumi back to Ngombe Lutete with them.

**Birth of Wabeladio**

Lombo Marie remarried, to a Catholic man with whom she had eight children: five boys and three girls. Among them were Difuayame Paul-
Laurent and Mafuila Gracia (they passed away in 2012 and 2013, respectively), two men who will become quite important in later parts of this biography. As for Vumi (who died in 1993), she grew up in Ngombe Lutete, got married and had many children, but they were all girls. When she was pregnant for the seventh time, Wabeladio told me, she started to have dreams suggesting that a boy might be on the way. Let us hear how David Wabeladio recalled her words about his birth:

When I was pregnant with you, every night I had a dream in which Papa Simon Kimbangu was taking a bath in the sacred waters of N’kamba, uphill, and I was taking a bath in the same waters, pregnant, downhill. A star was shining in the sky and then it would fall into the waters, between him and me, and because this dream came every night, I had the hope that maybe I was going to have a boy. One month before giving birth to you, Pierre Yafu, the driver of a Portuguese trader, came to me and told me: ‘I dreamed that I should come here to warn you not to go to hospital. The boy you are going to give birth to has a mission; if you go to hospital, they will poison him.’

David Wabeladio Payi was born in 1957. Because of the warning of the Portuguese man’s driver, Vumi refused to go to hospital.

I was born in the backyard of their house in Ngombe Lutete. A nurse came from hospital to force Vumi to go there, but she hid in the bush with her baby. Vumi loved her only boy. She called me ‘Papa Wabeladio’ because she thought that I was the reincarnation of her father. I was a spoiled little boy, and some of my sisters were very jealous. They complained to our uncles, who decided to take me away from Vumi so as to deter me from growing up spoiled. This way, in 1964, when I was seven years old, I left Ngombe Lutete for Mbanza-Ngungu, where I lived with my uncle Mafuila Gracia and sometimes with my uncle the Catholic priest [Difuayame Paul-Laurent, ordained in 1966]. My five maternal uncles, including the priest, were wealthy traders, especially Mafuila Gracia, and because of that I lived in comfort and got an easy upbringing. I went to two Catholic schools, first in Kisantu and then in Mbanza-Ngungu. I was baptised in 1972, in a Catholic parish at Kisantu called Sept Douleurs [Seven Sorrows].

Despite his official conversion to Kimbanguism in 1988, Wabeladio always showed a great respect for the church in which he had been brought up and that he abandoned slowly between 1978 and 1988. The faith in Simon Kimbangu as a mediator between humans and God, which had been so important to his grandfather’s generation, had gradually been erased, or repressed, in the family’s collective memory, especially since Wabeladio’s grandmother had married a Catholic man, the father of Mafuila Gracia and Difuayame Paul-Laurent. However, as seen in the dream Vumi wa Nzambi had when she was pregnant with Wabeladio, there was a latent belief in Kimbanguism. It was soon to re-emerge more explicitly.
Wabeladio Payi did his secondary schooling in Saint Alphonse School, on the outskirts of Mbanza-Ngungu. He claimed to have always been a good student, and I could verify that his grades were indeed excellent. Yet, when he was still very young, his uncle Mafuila Gracia told Wabeladio that he would make him stop attending school.

Uncle Gracia had a very low opinion of studies. He wanted me to become a trader, like himself and his brothers. All of Vumi’s brothers were wealthy traders, some of them trading between Angola and Léopoldville (Kinshasa) through Thysville (Mbanza-Ngungu). Sometimes the uncle would have me dressed up as a schoolboy, but then I would be sent to Kinshasa instead of to school. The school dress was a disguise to fool people into thinking I was on my way to a school, whereas in fact I was a courier transferring big amounts of money from the uncle to someone else or vice versa. I did not like the idea of abandoning school. ‘I must study, because in the years to come I will have a mission and I cannot abandon the studies now,’ I told my uncle. But the two uncles were ready to thwart my future. They told me that studies were useless in the Zaire of the time.

According to documentation I found in Kinshasa, Wabeladio finished primary school in 1971. He was then supposed to enter secondary school, but his uncles refused to register him for the cycle long. In the Zairian educational system of the time, students could either enrol on the four-year cycle long, which led to university studies, provided they performed satisfactorily in a demanding ‘state exam’, or they could go for the two-year cycle d’orientation, which allowed them to qualify for a further three years of professional training, after which they would be awarded a Certificate of Professional Studies (Brevet d’Aptitude Professionnelle).

One day, Mafuila Gracia told me: ‘We have suffered a lot, because unlike you we had no [maternal] uncles and it was hard growing up; but you are lucky, you have wealthy uncles. I now fear for you, because you do not seem to care much for your social life. In this day and age, you ought to be thinking about getting married and having children. So, I propose you take my friend’s child. I will pay for the bridewealth and the ceremony. Tomorrow you stay here, and you will see a girl called Pascaline, who will come to visit you. You are going to marry her.’ For me, however, marriage was not a priority. I really wanted to finish my studies. My uncle arranged for Pascaline to come and visit me regularly, cook for me and stay till late with me, but I categorically refused to marry her and I paid little attention to her. My uncle also found a minivan for me to start trading in the region and he was ready to help me open a depot in Mbanza-Ngungu. I categorically refused: ‘I must look after my own work. I must complete my studies, because in the future I will have major responsibilities that require good training; for me to be able to organise myself I really must study.’ My uncle was offended. There was a rupture. From that time no one took care of me. From that
day onwards, I had to support myself, with great difficulty, living day to day with occasional jobs until I was able to complete my schooling.

Wabeladio finished the cycle d’orientation in 1974 in Mbanza-Ngungu and then enrolled on a course specialising in diesel mechanics; he gained his Brevet d’Aptitude Professionnelle in July 1977. He was then accepted as a trainee at the ONATRA (National Office of Transport) in Mbanza-Ngungu, where he worked for six months. He was supposed to complete his training with a further six-month stage at the National Society for Train Transportation (Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Zaïrois, or SNCZ) in Kinshasa. So, sometime between February and March 1978, he moved from Mbanza-Ngungu to Kinshasa.

Had his uncles supported him, Wabeladio would no doubt have enrolled in a cycle long and, most likely, university too. His resentment at not having been allowed to do so was very often explicitly discussed in conversations with him, and it was, I believe, a powerful engine in his own self-making. His life since March 1978 could be interpreted as a strong reaction to his frustration, perhaps as a mechanism of ‘compensation’, in psychoanalytical terms. When I think about Wabeladio’s life and about his tenacity against the odds, an image comes to mind of Baron Münchhausen getting himself (and his horse) out of a bog by pulling up his own ponytail. Like the imaginative, resourceful Baron, Wabeladio got stuck, and, much as the Baron did, he managed to release himself and move on thanks to his own stubbornness and inner strength. But the path he started on was a hard one and he would get stuck many more times.

While sitting in my office at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon (where I was employed at the time) during one of our earliest sessions recording his life story, I said to Wabeladio, in reference to how badly his uncles treated him in those early days: ‘David, you have suffered a lot.’ To which he replied:

Oh yes, and you have not heard anything yet. I have indeed suffered a lot because of my invention. And this is why I want you to write this book. I want it to be a message for African youths: if you have a dream, you have to follow it no matter how hard it is.

Incipit History: A Mystical Quest

At the end of the third session, Wabeladio said, ‘That is the end of prehistory.’ He asked me to stop recording, promising that the following day we would explore how Mandombe was born out of a revelation in
Mbanza-Ngungu in 1979 – a story he himself had written and published many years earlier (Wabeladio Payi 2007).

The episodes after the ‘prehistory’ include his ascent to N’kamba in 1978, a journey Wabeladio had learned to present in a typical ‘quest’ style, insisting on mystical difficulties, fears, and seven miracles. Readers of other spiritual journeys – such as, for instance, the Spanish mystical poet St John of the Cross’s ascent to Mount Carmel – will no doubt find similarities in the narrative pattern.

It was in the night between 13 and 14 March 1978 [when Wabeladio began completing his technical training in Kinshasa] that Mandombe entered proper history. I and two of my aunts were sleeping in Kinshasa.2 My uncle and my mother were in Mbanza-Ngungu. That night, I was having a recurrent dream in which a voice was commanding me to go to N’kamba, the holy city of Kimbanguism, to pray and bathe in the holy waters of the sacred source and prepare myself to receive a mission in favour of the black race.

In Kikongo, the phrase was: ‘David, wenda ku N’kamba, wenda sambila ye yobila, kadi salu una baka mu diambu dia kanda dia bandombe.’ Following common usage in his country, Wabeladio translated kanda dia bandombe as race noire (‘black race’), but he could just as well have translated it as ‘Africans’. In Kikongo, ndombe (pl. bandombe) is used to refer to the native inhabitant of the soil. The concept is structurally opposed to that of mundele (pl. mindele), meaning the white newcomer arriving from the Atlantic. Wabeladio, like many other Congolese people, hesitated between translating ndombe as either ‘African’ or ‘black’. This is why he finally opted to officially translate his invention, Mandombe, as écriture négro-africaine – a clever solution that encapsulated both the ‘black’ and the ‘African’ sides of the equation.

Years later, Wabeladio would claim that the dream of 13 March 1978 was the first one in the series of miracles that led him to the revelation of Mandombe. But, at the time, he was terrified.

My mother’s sister, Mbonga Elisabeth, told me: ‘This is not a dream; it is a nightmare; pray and go back to bed.’ But I kept having the dream, in an authoritarian tone. I told auntie I could not sleep. For a third time the dream came, with a vibrant tone, and again I woke auntie up. This time she became furious at me: ‘Who might be calling you in N’kamba? We are not Kimbanguist in this family!’

2 The two aunts were his mother’s half-sister, Luvuvumu Mbonga Elisabeth, and Mantantu Eva, one of Mafuila Gracia’s wives. The former was the daughter of the Catholic man her mother had married, not of Wabeladio David. I do not know whether she knew of the tragic story of the latter and the family’s links to the prophet Simon Kimbangu. It occurs to me that she probably did, but that she did not want her nephew to know about it.

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At the time, Wabeladio knew nothing whatsoever about his grandfather’s personal friendship with Simon Kimbangu, or about his death as a relegated in Port Francqui. On her marriage to a Catholic man, after Wabeladio David’s death, Wabeladio’s grandmother had become a Catholic. She repressed her own memories about the family’s Kimbanguist past and about the traumatic events of the relegation. To be sure, this Catholic family had a somewhat antagonistic opinion of the Kimbanguist holy city of N’kamba.

The next morning the neighbours told the two women that N’kamba was a place where people went to pray, and that even non-Kimbanguists were welcome there. The two women accepted that perhaps they should let me go, but they decided that we would go first to Mbanza-Ngungu and listen to uncle Mafuila Gracia. When we reached Park Moulaert [a station where communal transport to Mbanza-Ngungu could be found] a second miracle happened. We entered a Peugeot 404. The two aunts sat inside it with me. Then the two of them had the same vision. They saw, sitting on my left side, the late Simon Kimbangu with chains on his arms, neck and feet, and blood all over his body. They panicked and jumped immediately out of the car. They related the vision to everybody around them and refused to get back in the car. But then other drivers refused to take them. ‘It is a dangerous route, and if they are experiencing these miracles, they can put us all in danger,’ the driver said. So, we returned home and decided to travel the next day, by train. When we arrived in Mbanza-Ngungu, the uncle was furious. ‘What’s all this fuss about Kimbangu?’ he said. ‘We are Catholic, not Kimbanguist! How could he dream of N’kamba? You should have called me on the phone from Kinshasa; I would have come and looked for a diviner who would have told us what all this is about; today we are having a meeting and we will decide on this problem.’ That day, at night, Mafuila Gracia summoned a family meeting with Wabeladio’s mother and sisters. They all came, and it was decided that next morning, at six o’clock, I would be sent back to Kinshasa, where he would take me to a psychiatrist.

I could not sleep. I spent all night thinking about my uncle’s decision to take me back to Kinshasa and have me examined. So, I decided to escape, go to N’kamba. At 4 o’clock, when everybody was sleeping, I woke up my two little cousins, Nkodia Mafuila and Mikiele Mafuila, and begged them to accompany me to N’kamba without telling their parents. We took an oil lamp, a Bible, some blankets, and off we went.

N’kamba, the holy city of Kimbanguism, is some 55 kilometres uphill from Mbanza-Ngungu, and the road would have been far from obvious to three young boys who did not know it. The two brothers obeyed their older cousin, and they all left for the unknown, mysterious, and remote city of N’kamba.

When we had just crossed the little river Ngongo, which separates the Bandibu and Besingome Bakongo [two major Kongo subgroups], we sat down on top of a hill to rest a little bit. Nkodia Mafuila saw an old man coming out from the bush,
with cloths under his arm and a rod in his hand. The young boy shouted in fear. I asked the old man why he was coming out of the bush. He replied: ‘I am just trying to reach the road where you are. I am coming from the village on the other side of the hill, where I went to attend my aunt’s burial.’ And off he went, on the road, taking the same direction as we were going to be taking a few minutes later, towards N’kamba. My cousins and I followed a bit later.

The feeling that there was something numinous about the emergence of this man from the middle of the bush was confirmed a bit later.

As soon as we started to walk, following the man, a third miracle took place. I heard a song coming from the sky: "Ah ah ah aleluya wanlongo / Ah ah ah aleluya wanlongo / Kenu kendalala ko." That means: ‘Alleluia, the sacred / Alleluia the sacred / Do not lament it.’ ‘Do you hear that?’ I asked. But my cousins did not hear anything. Then I heard a second hymn: "Aleluya, nkembo a Nzambi / Aleluya, se usongua." This means: ‘Alleluia, God’s glory / alleluia, soon to be manifested.’ The music accompanied me to the village of Kimongo, where it stopped. A bit later, night started to fall. We had been walking for more than 12 hours and we were tired and worried. There was moonlight that night. I asked my cousins to kneel and pray, so that God would help us find a village where we could eat and sleep. Then a fourth miracle took place. When I was praying, Nkodia Mafuila said, ‘Mbota David, mbota David, look at what is happening in the sky!’

All the stars had gathered in a circle, right above our heads. The moon was outside the circle. This is what is called a constellation. This kind of thing happened in Israel in old times, but we experienced it in our own days, just above our heads. I told my cousins: ‘This is a good sign. Since it is happening just above our heads, it means God has listened to our prayer. Let’s move on!’ We continued and reached a small hamlet with only one house, where a woman invited us to eat something. She told us that if we walked five more minutes, we would reach Milombo, a bigger settlement. When we reached Milombo, I recognised the village [they were now close to Ngombe Lutete, where Wabeladio had lived until he was seven years old] and remembered that next to it there is another village, Lumweno, where my mother had a good friend. In Lumweno I met a man I knew, Papa Yembe, who had been working as a guardian in my uncle’s house in Mbanza-Ngungu. He had retired and had decided to come back to his village to be close to his sisters and look after their children. He was amazed to see the children and the nephew of his ex-boss in such a remote area, and gave us dinner and a place to sleep. Much later, when I was fast asleep, my youngest cousin woke me up: ‘I cannot sleep, there is someone crying at the door!’ Someone was weeping on the other side of the door. ‘Please let us sleep,’ I said to whoever was there, ‘we are tired and must get up very early to go to N’kamba.’ But Nkodia kept waking me up and did so three times. In the end, I understood we were not going to sleep at all, so I decided to hit the road again and walk all night. As soon as we left the house, just a few metres away, I felt the earth was trembling, like the beginning of an earthquake. My cousins, however, did not feel anything. Then, suddenly, I realised my two feet had become stuck to the ground, and I remained like that for six hours. I was glued to the ground till dawn. ‘I am stuck to the ground!’ I shouted. My cousins tried to pull me out, but they could not remove me from the position. A heavy rain came with lightning and storms.
The cousins wanted to get inside the house again to protect themselves, but they could not unglue me from the ground, hard as they tried.

This inexplicable event had worried Wabeladio ever since it happened in 1978. Much of his life consisted in interpreting that petrifying moment. He read about similar situations in the history of humanity (for instance Lot’s wife), and he wanted to know whether science would be capable of explaining why, at that particular spot in Kongo Central, someone should become glued to the ground.

In the small hours of the morning, I finally managed to free myself, and I walked away from the spot. But that was not the end of it. The oil lamp was also stuck to the ground! The three of us tried to pull it out but could not. We decided to abandon it. ‘We’re going back to Mbanza-Ngungu,’ I said to my cousins, perhaps this is a sign from God that we should not have left without the elders’ permission. Let us go back home and talk to them.’ We returned towards Mbanza-Ngungu. A few minutes later we reached the neighbouring hamlet of Kiatatu kia Lumweno. There, some people gathered around us. I explained what we had been going through.

The men, who, like most people in the area were Kimbanguist, found the story rather uncanny. They decided to take the young man and his two companions to the Kimbanguist pastor.

The pastor received us and prepared some warm coffee before going to the temple to pray and decide whether he should let us go back to Mbanza-Ngungu or force us to go to N’kamba to fulfil the trip. But then, before they had even started to have breakfast, a sixth miracle took place. The pastor’s wife was coming back from the river. She saw the crowd around her husband, looked at me, threw the bucket onto the floor and started to shout in panic: ‘Aaaaaaaah! Take this man out of this village, take this man out of this village.’ And she ran away into the bush. People who witnessed the scene were amazed. I had not said a word to the woman. Some people went to ask her what had frightened her, but she would only repeat: ‘Chase this man out of our village, chase this man out of our village.’ The villagers asked me if I was ‘mystique’. ‘Are you an ET?’ they also asked. ‘No, I am not an ET! I am just walking through this village.’ ‘Then what have you done to this woman?’ ‘Nothing! Go ask her. She is the one who says she sees something in me, go ask her what it is. I cannot tell you. I told you I am experiencing a series of miracles; you told me we had to report this to the Kimbanguist pastor and the head of the village. It is this woman who has to tell us what she saw in me.’ ‘Tell us the truth,’ said one of them, with a stick in his hand, ready to beat me up. ‘This is very weird, to frighten someone like that in full daylight. Are you “mystique”?’ I was then beaten up and strip-searched, so as to verify that I had no powerful product or object with me, that I was not a sorcerer. They found nothing. Finally, someone said: ‘Let him go. It is the woman who is behaving badly here; she should have indeed told us what is going on. Maybe she is a sorcerer, not him. Let us stop brutalising him. I think...
the only advice we are going to give him is that he must go to N’kamba. We will accompany him, so that we can explain to the Spiritual Chief in N’kamba what strange things we have seen today, and what has happened with the pastor’s wife who is still in the bush.’ Someone else said: ‘Yes, let us go and testify that these three boys are living all these miracles.’

Do you know what impressed me most, Mr Ramon? The Kimbanguist pastor said *nothing* during all this time. He had listened to the entire thing in silence, without even attempting to know why his wife had been so frightened. This really puzzled me. Why this silence?

Despite the announced plan, however, the men did not accompany the trio all the way to N’kamba. They left them four miles from the sacred city. It was the month of March, in the midst of the rainy season, and they had to take advantage of the fact that it was not raining that day to go and work in their cassava fields. They pointed out the right path to Wabeladio and his cousins.

As we approached the holy city, I noticed a man walking in front of us. He wore blue trousers and a white shirt. Suddenly the man started to fly, like a bird, at times floating like when you hang a shirt on a line and the wind moves it softly. ‘This is yet another miracle! Look at the man flying like a bird!’ I shouted to my cousins. The man flew to Simon Kimbangu’s mausoleum first, and then he flew again towards an adjacent hill of N’kamba, where the school of Kilo is located. At the school, the man flew several times from one end of the roof to the other, like vultures do, but this was no vulture. He then flew straight up into the sky, where he disappeared.

Let us remember that, in his dream, Wabeladio had been told by an imperative voice, which he always attributed to Kimbangu, that he had to go to N’kamba because he was going to be given a mission, but he was not told what the mission was. When he saw the man flying in N’kamba, he thought that he was going to tell him what his mission was. But the man did not talk at all.

I stood by the mausoleum of Simon Kimbangu and burst into tears, sad because the man had left without letting me know what my mission was. Looking at it in retrospect, I can say I was somehow wrong at the time. The man who disappeared mysteriously, I do not know if he was an angel or Kimbangu himself; he was wearing a teacher’s dress – blue trousers and white shirt. This was the mission I was to receive from God: an educational mission, the invention of a scientific alphabet. But at the time I did not understand this, and I became very frustrated by his disappearing without a word.

In 1978, the Kimbanguist church was led by Joseph Diangienda Kuntima, who was based in Kinshasa, not N’kamba. He was referred to as *mfumu’anlongo* (spiritual chief). His older brother, Salomon Dialungana (1914–2001), was called *mfumu’ambanza* (chief of the city) because he
spent most of his time in N’kamba. Yet, on that particular day, Dialungana was not there either: some administrative duties had taken him to Kinshasa, where he and his brother were preparing to celebrate 6 April (in those days, the most important date in the Kimbanguist liturgical year). Wabeladio was received by one of the church’s *mambuta* (elders), Papa Samba Katumua, who I also met in 2010. Despite his age, he vividly remembered the day Wabeladio arrived in 1978. He gave the boys something to eat and asked someone to take Wabeladio to be bathed in the sacred source, as had been foreshadowed in Wabeladio’s dream.

We were all taken to the sacred source, where we prayed and took a bath. After the bath, I was taken back to the central building, by the big temple. As soon as I reached the building, I saw that my uncle, my mother, and one of my sisters were there, waiting for me. They had driven from Mbanza-Ngungu to Ngombe Matadi and walked to N’kamba. ‘My wife is devastated,’ uncle Mafuila Gracia said. ‘We must go immediately to Mbanza-Ngungu. People are talking; they say you are mad and have kidnapped your own cousins.’ We walked back to Ngombe Matadi and then drove to Mbanza-Ngungu.

It was in that geographical context, and probably inspired by their walk to the car through the village of Ngombe Lutete (where the family was from), that Vumi wa Nzambi told her son, for the first time, the story of her father Wabeladio David and his death in Port Francqui.

A huge crowd was expecting them in Mbanza-Ngungu. In a family meeting, Wabeladio’s two cousins gave their testimony. They explained all the marvels they had experienced on the journey, highlighting how Wabeladio got stuck on the ground for six hours and the way in which the pastor’s wife had reacted to his mere presence.

**Wabeladio Among the Healers**

Wabeladio’s uncle became convinced that his nephew was possessed by pure evil, and contrary to what he had claimed a few days earlier, he now thought a psychiatrist would be of little help.

‘You see! I told you, he has found some fetish or magic. Why otherwise would people be so scared of him as to run away into the bush? He must be taken to a witchdoctor immediately.’ I was taken to a traditional healer in Kasai Avenue. Dozens of people gathered around the men taking me as though I was a parcel. They arrived at the healer’s house and left me on the ground. I could not move. I was left there, lying down like a goat or a sheep about to be sacrificed. The healer came. There were more than 40 people gathered at the door, observing with curiosity what was going on. The healer took my left hand and looked at its palm. ‘Uh huh!’ he said. ‘This boy has been looking for a fetish in 74 Kato Avenue, Kinshasa … They are asking him for ten people from his family.’ Everybody
shouted in admiration. Then my [maternal] grandmother came around and performed a ceremony, dancing around me, singing: ‘I am the mother of this family, it is I who have created this family. If you try to take anyone from this family, you must die!’ The healer then went into his room and came out with a bottle containing some weird concoction. He forced me to drink it. It tasted horrible. I defecated ipso facto, in front of my relatives, in front of my mother. I felt extremely weak. ‘Go wash him!’ ordered the healer. My mum took me to the backyard of the house to wash me. For the first time since I was a baby, in my 21 years of age, I was bathed by my mum like a newborn. Afterwards the healer ordered me to be taken to an annexe to his house. I was laid down on a mat. I slept a lot, till next morning, when the healer woke me up. ‘You can tell me now where you found the fetish,’ he said, authoritatively. A few minutes later he came out again with a bag in which he had a rope and handcuffs. He asked me to stand by the central wooden pillar of the house so he could tie me onto the wooden pillar. Even my mother could not take any more of it. ‘Leave my son alone,’ she shouted. But the healer tied me up and put the handcuffs on my legs. He told my mother: ‘He is a bad boy; he refuses to confess, but he did find some fetish and he was ready to exterminate your whole family.’ He looked at me and said: ‘Now you’ll see …’ He then went to look for a stick. ‘Tell me, where did you find the fetish?’ he asked again. ‘I have not found any.’ The healer then started to beat me with the stick. Even my mother had to intervene again: ‘How can you beat a child like this?’ The healer replied: ‘He must tell us where he found the fetish, that’s why.’ Then, when I was in tears, a spirit in me told me: ‘Sing the hymn you heard on the road to N’kamba.’ And I started to sing …

_Ah ah ah aleluya wa nIongo
Ah ah ah aleluya wa nIongo
Kenu kendalala ko_

When I started to sing, I noticed the witchdoctor sensed something. I think he saw in me the same thing that the woman [the Kimbanguist pastor’s wife] had seen. Because as soon as I started to sing, he shouted ‘Ah!’ and ran away, throwing the stick away. He left and did not come back till 6 p.m. I stayed at the healer’s for an entire week, at the end of which my older sister, Louise Kinzanzu, came from Kinshasa. Oh, she was an intelligent woman. ‘What is going on, David?’ she asked. I told her about the dream, about the journey to N’kamba, about the miracles, about the treatment. ‘Yes, I know about all that, but why are you still handcuffed?’ she asked. She then told off the healer for being so cruel. ‘Your brother is a bad boy and a witch; in fact, your own name was on the list of the ten people he was going to give away.’ My sister replied: ‘Even if he was giving away people for obscure motives, he is our brother; you have found him out, OK, now we can talk to him and advise him on how to behave; this is not a way to treat anybody. Let him go; we’ll deal with him.’

Finally, the man agreed and let Wabeladio go, and Louise took him to the uncle’s house. His uncle Father Diufuiya was also there:
‘I had proposed you become a truck driver,’ he said. ‘I could have given you a car and helped you find the merchandise. Now you want to exterminate the family. Do not call me uncle ever again; it is all over now between you and me.’

On the third day, another uncle, Marcellin kia Vambuka, arrived in Mbanza-Ngungu to look for his nephew. Like the other men in that family, Marcellin was quite a wealthy man. Wabeladio told me that he had a car, a big house, and five estates in Kinshasa, and all his children were studying in Europe. Marcellin kia Vambuka had been told about Wabeladio’s misfortunes and had concluded that the boy had to be taken to a psychiatrist, not to a traditional healer. So Wabeladio and his mother left for Kinshasa.

The next day, the uncle instructed the women [Wabeladio’s mother and her sister Mbonga Elisabeth] to go to the CNPP, Centre Neuro-Psycho-Pathologique, of the University Clinic of Kinshasa. He was ready to cover all the expenses for the entire treatment. It was 5 April 1978.

The doctor asked me: ‘Young man, what do you feel?’ I said: ‘I do not know why they are saying that this is like the beginning of madness. I told them that this is a revelation. I had a dream that I should go to N’kamba. I went to N’kamba, lived through a series of miracles on my way there, and then as soon as I was back in Mbanza-Ngungu they took me to a féticheur! He started to prophesise that I had found a fetish and I had to offer [in sacrifice] ten people, and other things; all this they did to me … and they still believe I am mad!’ Dr Diansongi turned to Mbonga Elisabeth: ‘A mad person would never reason like this! He cannot be mad.’

According to Wabeladio, the doctor did some tests on him, including an electroencephalogram, a spinal cord puncture, and urine analysis. At the end, he diagnosed that there was nothing wrong with Wabeladio and released him.

We went back to Mbonga Elisabeth’s home in Kalamu, Kinshasa. There a friend of Mbonga Elisabeth’s came round. ‘I have heard about your nephew,’ she said, ‘being stuck to the ground and living miracles and all that. There is a marabout who has just arrived from Mecca, called by the Muslim community of Kinshasa to be their imam. He predicts things and I am sure he can find out why all these things happened to your nephew.’ The next morning, they went to visit him. He was not a Congolese. He was West African … No, most probably a Saudi Arabian.

Wherever he was from, his name, Wabeladio remembered, was Papa Djop. They found him in the Isoke Street mosque. Papa Djop received them and agreed to perform a divination ceremony to find out what was wrong with Wabeladio.

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3 Doctor Diansongi, a well-known Zairian neurologist.
After the ceremony, he took my aunt aside and talked to her for about half an hour without me or my mother listening. He told her: ‘Your nephew is not ill; he did receive a revelation … What the boy says is true. There is a powerful spirit accompanying him. It is useless for you to take him elsewhere, alas. I advise you, if possible, to bring him back to me and leave him here with me so that we can help him convert to Islam; he can become a great master in our religion. We can help him develop his discovery, because as he is now, he does not see that there is a spirit with him. He still has to get in touch with the spirit and he will do extraordinary things. Do not tell him this so as to prevent him from becoming too arrogant, but the truth is he has received a mission, not yet revealed to him’ …

The next day, another of my aunts said she had heard about a very good Sakata diviner who had come from the province of Bandundu. They took me there too. The diviner performed a séance with a coin he placed inside a bowl … He said: ‘When I invoke my spirit, if the coin does not fall from the bowl, the child is not bad, but if it falls, he will tell us where he found his nkisi.’ The diviner then invoked a spirit called m'fumu ngala in Kisakata after which he violently turned the bowl and put it upside down on the table. The coin did not fall down onto the table: it was sitting on the bottom of the bowl when the man turned it again to its normal position. The seer then shook my hand, congratulating me for not being a sorcerer. ‘Give me my money. He is a good boy; he only needs to pray. Do not take him to places like this any more. It is useless, he is a fine boy.’

The next day I said to my mother: ‘Mum, you are not taking me to anybody else. You just take me to Papa Diangienda.’

Revelation

‘Papa Diangienda’ is the usual shorthand for Joseph Diangienda Kuntima (1918–92), the youngest son of Simon Kimbangu and the spiritual chief of the Kimbanguist church, who was based in Kinshasa.

Papa Diangienda received me and listened to me. I told him about the miracles I had experienced and the suffering I had been exposed to. But it was when I told Diangienda about the two hymns I heard on my way to N’kamba that Diangienda noticed something. He looked at one of the advisers who was there with them in the room and asked him: ‘And how do we call these hymns in the church?’ ‘These are Promise Hymns [minkunga mia nsilulu],’ said the other one. And then Diangienda explained to me: ‘This is what in our church we call Promise Hymns. In 1921 my father Simon Kimbangu heard these songs; the angels were singing them to him. The first one you heard is the one he heard when he was told he was going to receive a revelation. The second one you heard is the one he heard when he started his miraculous work, on 6 April 1921. All you have seen are signs that show that you have been chosen. My father has chosen you for an important mission for Africans; you have to pray and pray, and the mission will be revealed to you. Are you Kimbanguist?’ ‘No,’ I replied. ‘Well, I am not going to force you to become a Kimbanguist, but you must know to which road you have been called.’
After seeing so many féticheurs, neurologists, and diviners, this was the only message that made sense to Wabeladio – and, I suspect, to his mother too. They went back to Mbanza-Ngungu. Wabeladio was determined to pray as Diangienda had recommended. He settled in his uncle’s house, sharing a room with his nephew Sebastien and a cousin. He locked himself in the room, without leaving for anything. He lived there, only praying, for eight months, giving rise to all sorts of rumours about his mental state again.

I was asking God why I had been stuck to the ground. I just prayed and prayed. My nephew and my cousin informed the family that I was doing nothing at all but praying, praying, and praying. For my family and neighbours, this was a confirmation that there was something wrong with me. News spread around that little David had definitely become mad! One day, my uncle [Father Difuayame Paul-Laurent] came around the house. He instructed: ‘Do not give him any food; he will be hungry. If you keep on giving him food every day while he is doing this thing, he will keep on thinking life is easy. This is why he is doing this.’ I would spend all day without eating anything. But then, quite late at night, my grandmother would pity me and towards 10 p.m. she would sneak some food into the room, saying: ‘Zobal [You dumb!], we have spent money for you and you always said you wanted to study but now the only thing you do is pray and ask God to give you a mission. But you cannot force God to do anything; he will give you something only if he wants to.’ This lasted for eight months. Then, at the end of the eighth month, I realised one day that the bricks on the wall in front of the bed drew a ‘5’ and a ‘2’ in their joints. I was astonished. ‘Do builders know this?’ I asked myself. I went out of the house and realised that all walls were the same, a massive combination of fives and twos. I called my cousin and nephew. ‘Look boys, without knowing it, builders are writing a series of fives and twos every time they build a wall.’

Sebastien, now employed at the Ministry of Agriculture in Boma, and whom Wabeladio and I interviewed in Matadi in 2011, did not find the information interesting. Quite the opposite: for him, it was confirmation that his uncle was losing his marbles. ‘We thought he was becoming mad,’ Sebastien admitted to us in 2011. ‘He was only talking about five and two and then spent a lot of time simply writing what looked like 5 and 2 on pieces of paper. It was only later, when the professors took his discovery seriously, that we realised he was making a scientific discovery.’

The same night I had seen the 5 and 2 on the wall, I dreamed that an insect came and started to inscribe, on my white shirt and trousers, the numbers 5 and 2 with its black saliva. I woke up anxiously, shouting, ‘Mama, mama, I am becoming cyphers!’ Then I fell asleep again, and I had a second dream. I saw Simon Kimbangu, standing by the Kimbanguist school of Mbanza-Ngungu, showing me a diploma with big golden letters. It said ‘Diploma of Material Activity’. Then, in the dream, Simon Kimbangu told me: ‘These two cyphers you have
seen on the wall, it is with them that you will be starting your material activity.\(^4\)

I woke up. I said to myself: ‘Maybe these cyphers contain things; I am going to start studying them.’ I started to write down combinations of these two cyphers, studying the shape, position, characteristics.

Wabeladio gave up praying and spent all his time focusing on the numbers, writing them on endless pieces of paper, as his nephew Sebastien recalled 40 years later. He was quite puzzled about the nature of the message he was receiving. In 2011, he told me that, being a Christian and a Mukongo, he thought the message he was praying for would be something like ‘There is a Messiah in such and such a village’ or ‘The end of the world will be on such and such a day’. As any Africanist historian or anthropologist knows very well, Kongo lands have had a rich history of messianic effervescence dating from their early encounters with Christianity some centuries ago (MacGaffey 1983; Thornton 1998), so Wabeladio’s expectations were perfectly understandable. He was preparing to receive a propositional kind of knowledge, not a puzzling image such as two numbers on a wall. ‘What can you do with a message like that?’ he asked me. Indeed, what can you do? The one thing he could do, to repeat the verb he himself used, was to study them. And this he did. For several days he drew only 5 and 2 again and again on sheets of paper, like people with hypergraphia disorder might do. But intelligence helped him move from sheer obsession to further insights. He realised that the two numbers were in a symmetrical relationship; later on, he realised that they were in a relation of rotation, too. He developed other figures, following the strict geometrical rules explained in Chapter 7. He was still a long way from inventing anything, but he realised that he could draw all sorts of things: beautiful designs, houses, etc. He wrote everything, and soon collected a massive file on the structure of 5 and 2 and their transformation into other figures.

‘David,’ said my uncle, ‘you are totally mad … Listen, a madman who you see assembling clutter in the street never realises he is mad. He thinks that whatever it is that he is doing is perfectly normal. It is only those who look at him who can say he has become mad. So we tell you that this is folly.’ The news reached Father Difyuma Paul, who came and also expressed his deep concern. They were all asking me to abandon my investigations. One day, I went to the bathroom. When I came back into the room, I found all my papers were gone. I became furious. ‘Who has taken my papers?’ I asked. Nobody answered. Then, in front of everybody, I took a knife and put it on my neck. ‘I beg you for the last time; if in five seconds you do not give me the papers I will kill myself. I swear!’ I am

\(^4\) Wabeladio noted that the words were a mixture of Kikongo and French: \textit{Ntalu zozo za zole mueni, izozo luvangila mawonsono lu vuidi mfumu mu activité matérielle.}
counting. One, two, three …’ At this moment my grandmother said: ‘No, no, no! Do give him his papers back, give him the papers back.’ My sister left the room and came back a minute later, with all the papers. She threw them at me, saying: ‘David, if you are into any kind of magic, if you have found any fetish, do not even try to reach our children for your research. I tell you, you will go first!’ … I collected my papers, entered my room and resumed my work. I continued to study for several days, till one day I thought I ought to discuss the findings with scientists. At the time there was in Mbanza-Ngungu a physicist, called Luindula, who later was to be employed at the Institut Supérieur de Pédagogie of Mbanza-Ngungu. ‘Professor, I would like to have some information. I have discovered something on a wall. Two cyphers. Now I am making some research into these two cyphers and I am discovering a lot of things: art, mechanics, physics. I do not know if you could maybe have a look and give me some advice.’ Luindula answered: ‘You are discovering something very special here, a scientific writing system. The ideas are still at a simple stage, but you’d better protect this now. If you do not protect this, someone may come across it and develop it and then say he has invented it. You ought to go to Kinshasa to have this registered.’

In 2012, Wabeladio and I went to Mbanza-Ngungu to interview Luindula, in an attempt to interview as many people as possible who were still alive and who had been relevant in the development of Wabeladio’s invention. Then a rather old, retired teacher, Luindula acknowledged that he had been the first person to take Wabeladio seriously and remembered that he had indeed advised him to register his invention before someone else could steal it from him. Luindula was sad that people in Mbanza-Ngungu thought the boy was mad, whereas to him it was obvious that he was doing something quite clever and original. He told me that he even discussed it at the time with a friend of his who was a mathematician, and both were impressed by the geometrical dimension of Wabeladio’s incipient script. ‘I was very happy,’ Luindula told us, ‘a few months ago [December 2011] when Wabeladio was made Doctor Honoris Causa at the University of Kinshasa, for I always thought he had suffered a lot with his invention. I was invited to the academic exercise. It was very good for him. His uncles wanted him to become a trader, but he followed his own call.’

The Artists’ Approval and the End of ‘Madness’

If we trust Wabeladio’s memory, the day he decided to go to Kinshasa and have his invention properly registered was 8 April 1979. The first thing he did upon arriving in Kinshasa was to meet the artists at the prestigious Academy of Fine Arts (Académie des Beaux Arts, or ABA). He had been told by Luindula in Mbanza-Ngungu that he had to legally protect his invention, but not where or how to do so. He reached the conclusion, he
once told me, that since artists need to protect their creations they would surely know where one would normally go to protect an invention.

I walked to the Academy of Fine Arts. There I met Konde Bila, then a famous Zairian artist because he had made a famous portrait of President Mobutu and had collaborated in the design of the national flag. He was giving a lecture. He interrupted the lecture as he saw me staring at him from the door. ‘What do you want?’ I said, ‘Excuse me, professor. I am only here to obtain some information. I have invented something, and I was wondering how to protect it. It is a script [écriture], but one that has some implications in art.’ ‘In art?’ asked Konde Bila. ‘OK, wait till I finish my lecture.’ Five minutes later, Konde Bila ended his lecture and asked me to go into the classroom. I started to do my work on the blackboard. The professor sat down, as though he was the student. As I started developing more and more details about my script, Konde Bila said, ‘Hold on, boy, hold on,’ and he rushed away. He had gone to fetch other lecturers. A numerous group came back into the classroom.

Wabeladio could remember some of the artists – Ntabala, Kamba Luesa, Chiboko, Kitenda kia Masela – but claimed that there were also others whose names he could not remember. These were really at the cutting edge as far as creative art was concerned in Kinshasa in 1979. Many of the artists getting ready to listen to Wabeladio in that classroom were part of a group called ‘The New Generation’. They had made themselves very visible and famous in an exhibition at the Centre de Commerce International du Zaire (CCIZ) storehouse in Kinshasa on 13 July 1978. The group’s name made reference to the break they were trying to make vis-à-vis the avant-garde ‘elders’ who were then monopolising shows and exhibits in Kinshasa. I wonder whether their thirst for novelty, combined with the general ‘return to authenticity’ ambiance that reigned at the time in the Zairian artistic domain, made those artists particularly sympathetic to the works and persona of Wabeladio Payi. Like themselves, this young fellow, who appeared out of the blue from the remote hinterland, was trying to break with the structures of domination through an authentic invention; he showed them that the authentic African spirit really existed in the depths of the countryside.5 According to Wabeladio, Konde Bila said to his colleagues:

‘My dear colleagues, let me introduce you to a young star I have just met.’ He then added: ‘This boy has just found a fantastic writing system. With only two cyphers he creates extraordinary things.’

5 For the New Generation group and the context of its emergence, see Ibongo Gilungula (2009: 76–9). Ne-Mwine (1977) offers an invaluable source, written from within the governing intelligentsia, for understanding the work of painters in the mid-1970s (including some of those who would later be in the New Generation group) against the backdrop of the philosophy of ‘Authenticity’ and Mobutu’s cultural policies. Mobutu himself authored the prologue to the book.
I started the explanation again. When I finished, they all said: ‘This is great [génial]!’

Many of the artists who attended this meeting on 8 April 1979 have passed away. But, in 2012, I met with one of the youngest, Professor Lema Kusa, today a renowned painter who still teaches at the ABA. ‘For me,’ Lema Kusa told me, ‘it was particularly interesting. I am a publicist and I teach graphic arts, and to see Wabeladio in front of us doing what I could describe as graphology was fascinating. I wanted to know more.’

The art lecturers agreed that they would take me to national TV and record me, so that if someone attempted to steal this invention from me one day, we could prove that this script had been discovered in Zaire. We were four: Konde Bila, Ntabala, Chiboko, and me. We found a journalist called Emery Muana Moyo, who had a cultural programme called *Sur le podium* [On the podium]. Muana Moyo agreed to film me and promised he would be broadcasting the show that very evening, at 7 p.m. After the filming in the TV studio, I went to Park Moulaert to see if I could find anybody going back to Mbanza-Ngungu. Then I went to my aunt’s house. ‘Where did you go?’ asked the aunt: ‘We have been very worried. Your sister is looking for you all over town.’ ‘I went to the Academy of Fine Arts to look for advice. The artists took me to TV. I will be on TV tonight.’ … When at last the programme was aired, auntie could not believe her eyes. ‘David, is this not a miracle? Is this not a miracle?’ I did not even answer; I was watching the programme, listening to myself explaining on national TV how I had discovered Mandombe.

The effect of Wabeladio’s appearance on *Sur le podium* would be difficult to exaggerate. For Wabeladio, obviously, it was a peak experience of which he was very proud. But perhaps more importantly for his future was the effect the screening had on other people – and, to start with, on members of his family.

On my way to my aunt’s house that afternoon, I had met Jon, a neighbour from Mbanza-Ngungu who was about to get on the bus back to town. Through Jon, I made the news arrive in Mbanza-Ngungu that I would be on TV at 7 p.m. Jon only arrived in Mbanza-Ngungu at 7.15 p.m., but still in time to let everybody know that I was on national TV. Even people with severe disabilities made extraordinary efforts to go and watch the programme. [Wabeladio’s uncle was the president of the Association for Disabled People of the Lower Congo, as the province now called Kongo Central was then called.] ‘Is this a miracle? Is this a miracle?’ cried the uncle when he saw me on TV. The spirit of madness vanished. From that day onwards everybody had confidence in me. Everybody in Mbanza-Ngungu was convinced that I was mad. The TV programme came to prove I was not mad.

The artists were very impressed with Wabeladio, but they did not think that his invention should be registered at the SONECA (Société Nationale
des Éditeurs, Compositeurs et Auteurs), where they registered their own artworks. They suggested instead that he seek advice from the Department of Scientific Research (at that time, equivalent to a ministry).

I went there and met a scientist called Madati Lumbala, who listened to me and told me I should meet his superior, Professor Lofo, a physicist, who was at the time director of the Department of Sciences and Technologies within the Department of Scientific Research. I explained the invention to Lofo with all details. In the end, Professor Lofo said: ‘Young man, congratulations, you have found some new types of angles. These are logical angles that were floating in nature. With your intelligence you have captured and materialised them. Your script will reach very far. Now you should protect this, and please keep me posted about your development.’ Lofo then instructed me to go to the Ministry of National Economy, Department of Industry, which operates in partnership with the WIPO [World Intellectual Property Organization, based in Geneva].

Wabeladio went there, only to find that, in order to have his invention registered, he would have to write a long and detailed descriptive report explaining what it was that he had invented, what it could be useful for, and what its advantages would be. He would also have to pay some money. Wabeladio returned to Mbanza-Ngungu with a form to fill out and a report to write.

Despite the fact that he had been on television, his family refused to support his invention any further, and he had to rely on a friend to pay for the paper and mimeographing of the report. He and his friend even stole from the latter’s father to get the money they needed. A few days later, Wabeladio went back to Kinshasa with the report, but he still needed the money for the registration fee. He went to visit the only wealthy person he knew would support him: the spiritual chief of the Kimbanguist church. Diangienda Kuntima gave him US$100 – enough for Wabeladio to pay the fee and the fare back to Mbanza-Ngungu. Three months later, in Mbanza-Ngungu, Wabeladio finally received a letter with his Certificate of Invention. ‘It had been classed,’ Wabeladio duly noted in conversations, ‘in the B44F category.’